

Natural Building Materials Showrooms

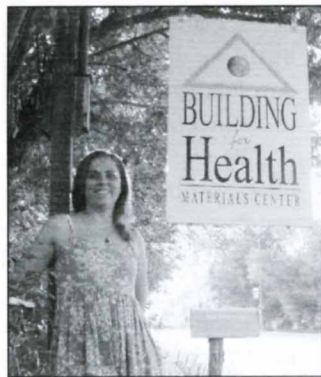
by Joyce Coppinger - Nebraska, USA

While preparing content for the *TLS Resource Guide* last year, I decided to survey owners/managers of natural building materials showrooms that I was aware of at the time (others found since then are added to the resource guide's section on *Natural Building Materials Showrooms and Sources* periodically). This article grew out of the responses received.

Around the country, a new source for natural building materials has begun to appear: showrooms. These spaces display building products and materials of bamboo, cork, palm fronds, sunflower seeds, earth, linoleum made from flax and other natural things, wool, ag fibers including straw, cotton, ceramic, recycled glass, clay, lime, corn, resins, and more. Some include home furnishings and furniture, bedding, cleaning products, clothing, and energy systems. Or they may specialize in flooring, wall finishes, countertops, cabinetry, roofing, wall systems, tile, solar attic fans, insulation and fabrics. Or may extend their product line to include composting toilets, appliances, books and videos.

Most popular with customers at present are bamboo or cork flooring, earthen plaster, low VOC paints, stains, specialty surface materials, roofing, caulks, and home furnishings. The showrooms can ship to other parts of the USA and some have the potential to ship to other countries (depending on the specifications of the product or material to be shipped, and the availability of these products or materials in other locations). While not all showrooms offer product installation services, they do try to maintain a list of qualified, experienced installers who can be contracted with locally. Homeowners can install many of the products, too. Professional installations are required for some products, however.

Natural building material showrooms are usually owned locally, although there are now a few franchises or chain stores within a region or local area. Cedar Rose Guelberth, Building for Health in Carbondale, Colorado, has been in business for about 20 years. Cedar Rose has over 30 years of experience with natural, healthy and environmentally sensitive construction and design, and technical support is provided for people who purchase products and materials from Building for Health. The product line now includes 5,000 items. Two other showrooms in the U.S., The Environmental Home Center in Seattle, Washington, and the Environmental Building Supply in Portland, Oregon, have been in business for 12 to 15 years.



Cedar Rose Guelberth, Building for Health

An *Environmental Building News* article in 2001 estimated only 12 green building materials retailers existed in that time. Natasha Winnik, a showroom owner in Tucson, Arizona, estimates there are 50 to 60 across the U.S. now, and others have been in operation in Canada and the United Kingdom for several years.

Discovering it was too difficult to find products for her own straw-bale home, Jen Carlson, started her own materials showroom Straw Sticks and Bricks in Lincoln, Nebraska, and now has a showroom in Kansas City, Missouri.



Jen Carlson, Straw Sticks and Bricks



Natasha Winnik, Originate Natural Building Materials

After an internship as a Green Materials Research Assistant in San Francisco, Natasha Winnik decided to shift her career goals from architectural design to materials and opened her showroom in Tucson, Arizona.

Showroom owners contacted say they have experienced a recent increase in interest in their product line since opening their businesses, attributing this to the more attention given to "green" building through the mass media. There is also a growing awareness on the part of many people about indoor air quality (chemical sensitivity, asthma, allergies and other health concerns), causing people to search for alternatives.

As with many parts of natural and green building operations, the pricing of products and materials is slightly higher than conventional building products and materials. For some materials such as paints, bamboo flooring, and natural linoleum, the price difference is less than five percent while higher end items (bamboo and kirei plywood, cotton batt insulation, for example) sometimes 10% to 15% more. Increased demand and use will bring the prices down – so purchasing now will help add more of these products and materials to the marketplace in the future.

Showroom business owners spend time and effort to increasing community awareness through Internet directory listings, magazine advertisements; newspaper, radio and television coverage; presentations and teaching at workshops and special events. Of course, word of mouth is still one of the best ways to bring in customers and clients. So when you purchase from these showrooms, let others know about them and help these businesses flourish. It's to everyone's advantage.